



**Resource Assistance for Rural Environments (RARE)**  
**Oregon Food Systems Work**  
**Executive Summary 2009 – 2011**

**Introduction:** Oregon Food Bank (OFB) has a long history of providing for the emergency food needs of low-income Oregonians. Through those efforts, OFB has become aware that emergency food is not enough to create real and meaningful food security for those in need. Nearly a decade ago, it became obvious that we would need to learn more about local and regional food systems and work to develop innovative approaches to long-term food security for our communities. As some of the most food insecure areas of the state, rural communities face unique challenges in obtaining and maintaining food security for their residents. The number of rural communities in Oregon classified as “food deserts” continues to grow with many people travelling between 60 and 100 miles to reach a supermarket. In a handful of these communities, an emergency food pantry is the only nearby option.

In 2008, OFB began partnering with the University of Oregon’s Community Service Center to embed Resource Assistance for Rural Environments (RARE) AmeriCorps members in rural communities with placements focusing on local food system assessment and development. RARE’s focus on rural communities is particularly helpful to Oregon Food Bank’s efforts to address the challenges and capitalize on opportunities in the most food insecure areas of the state.

The primary goal for a food systems RARE during his or her tenure is the completion of a comprehensive community food systems assessment (CFA). Through these projects and resulting documents we have been able to strengthen emergency food services and identify means to eliminate root causes of hunger in Oregon’s rural communities.

**What is RARE?** The mission of the RARE Program is to increase the capacity of rural communities to improve their economic, social, and environmental conditions through the assistance of trained graduate-level participants who live and work in communities for 11 months. RARE members assist communities and agencies in the development and implementation of plans for achieving a sustainable natural resource base and improving rural economic conditions while gaining community building and leadership skills. Members receive training in areas such as citizen involvement, outreach and communication, land-use planning, grant writing, project management, and computer skills. Since 1994, RARE has placed more than 300 members throughout rural Oregon.

In order for a community to be eligible to host a RARE, it must identify specific needs that can be addressed through the service of a RARE member. In addition to demonstrating a clear need for a RARE member, communities must have a high probability of developing and implementing successful community projects and a community which is supportive of the placement

Qualified graduate-level students are selected to serve as RARE members. About one-third of RARE members are former Peace Corps Volunteers, one-third are graduate students or recent graduates of planning, environmental science or related fields, and one-third are participating in RARE to clarify their graduate school goals. RARE members have a commitment to living and working in underserved rural areas.

**RARE and Oregon Food Bank:** Oregon Food Bank has been a RARE partner for four years, placing its participants in seven different communities and serving a total of 17 counties in Oregon and

Washington. RARE participants placed in collaboration with OFB have focused on local food system assessment, planning and implementation. The coordination and supervision of the RAREs is a shared responsibility between a local sponsoring organization and Oregon Food Bank. Local sponsors are responsible for day-to-day supervision of the RARE. OFB provides overall vision for the assessments, technical assistance, training and support to the projects. RARE participants come together at least four times during the year and OFB staff visits projects four to six times a year.

Local community partners have included regional food banks, such as CAPECO and the Southeast Oregon Regional Food Bank (SEORFB), food systems working groups such as Ten Rivers Food Web, and local agencies such as the Grant County Economic Development Office.

In addition to the general requirements outlined above, a community wishing to host an OFB food systems RARE must display a readiness to support a community food assessment and the accompanying organizing with a will to move forward with the results. All areas should have the desire to build support for local food producers and processing, retail access, and community production. Communities should demonstrate an interest in expanding programming and in filling gaps in food assistance programs for their low-income population. The placement of the first Oregon food systems RARE in 2008 at SEORFB was part of Statewide Services systematic approach to developing a rural regional food bank that did more than just move emergency food; the staff was looking for a deeper and more complete view of the local food system.

**Funding:** As an AmeriCorps program site, the University of Oregon receives administrative funding for each placement from the Corporation for National Service, with additional support from Ford Family Foundation. RARE asks communities to provide a match of \$19,500 to host a participant, most of this goes toward the participant's stipend. The first RARE match funding, in 2008, was provided through the General Fund Food Program (GFFP); the five placements in 2009/2010 were funded by an American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) grant submitted by the University of Oregon for the Oregon Food Bank/RARE project. The ARRA funding represented a contribution of nearly \$135,000 to OFB's community food systems work. Oregon Food Bank has funded the \$19,500 match as well as \$3,000 per member for expenses such as travel, printing and meeting costs—for the 2010/2011 placements. Local sponsors fund supervision, provide office space, and contribute additional support dollars as needed. Local fundraising efforts, foundation support, and GFFP funds from Community Connection funded the second year of the Grant County placement.

**Community Food Assessments:** A community food assessment (CFA) is a collaborative, participatory project that takes a big picture look at a food system, including production, consumption, and distribution. The intention of a CFA is to tell the story of a county or region's community food system through the experience and vision of the people who live and work in the area. Engaging the community through the assessment process produces a finished product that is not merely a report, but an organizing tool that moves community members to action. The community organizing approach to assessment builds networks and communication links at the community level through an intentional process, creating a social and economic environment in which all of the stakeholders begin to understand and evaluate their decisions and actions (including policy change) through the lens of their regional food system. Information gleaned through the assessment process through community meetings, focus groups and surveys is grounded in statistical data that is available from a variety of sources that provide community indicators, including but not limited to the US Department of

Agriculture, the Center for Disease Control, and the Northwest Area Foundation. The CFAs produced by the RAREs function as current organizing tools and as blueprints for future work. Full text of the CFAs produced by RAREs to date can be found on the Oregon Food Bank website here:

<http://oregonfoodbank.org/Our-Work/Building-Food-Security/Community-Programs/Community-Food-System-Resources>

**Methodology:** As part of the CFA process, RAREs conduct individual and small group interviews with a wide variety of food system stakeholders such as farmers, ranchers, small producers, grocery store owners, consumers and representatives of local schools and social service agencies. Some RAREs have administered surveys of local retailers and/or consumers. RAREs frequently arrange to participate in meetings of relevant community groups such as 4-H, the Grange and food bank agency meetings. As their level of community knowledge increases, they may assist in convening community members to organize around particular efforts such as community gardens, farm direct sales or emergency food programs. Most importantly, RARE participants strive to become part of the communities where they live for nearly a full year. Their efforts at volunteering with community groups and in participating in community activities ensure that the resulting food assessments are truly a conversation with the community about their food system.

**RARE Communities:** To date, food systems RAREs have been placed in eight Oregon communities serving 18 Oregon and three Washington counties (descriptions of these communities and their corresponding counties are located at the end of this report). Two of these placements have been two-year placements—Ontario (Harney, Malheur counties) in 2008/2009 and 2009/2010, and John Day (Grant county) in 2009/2010 and 2010/2011. In 2010, the first five RAREs completed comprehensive reports detailing the results of their CFAs and related activities. Reports from the remaining three communities are currently being finalized, along with an update from John Day.

**Outputs:** Table 1 illustrates the major RARE activities and accomplishments to date. As shown, all placements completed a formal CFA. Most were able to organize one or more FEAST\* workshops, publish a local Food Guide†, and complete a Rural Grocery Store survey‡. The column on the far right lists additional accomplishments, described in the following paragraph. Typically, RAREs explore the possibilities for implementation of all of these potential activities; however, communities are in varying stages of readiness. Some may have established farmers markets and community gardens, while others are only beginning the conversations.

**Farmers Markets:** Farmers markets provide opportunities for producers to sell their products and for community members to purchase fresh, local food. Many farmers markets accept SNAP benefits, WIC, and other forms of non-traditional payment. Farmers markets can also serve to educate consumers about seasonal produce.

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\* [Food, Education, Agriculture, Solutions, Together] FEAST workshops bring together community members from a variety of sectors to discuss local food systems, connect with neighbors, and develop action plans.

† Local food guides are print and web-based food guides that provide free listings and advertising to local producers.

‡ Rural grocery store surveys gather information from rural grocery store owners about products and services offered, suppliers, purchasing and delivery, locally grown food, challenges, collaboration, and store information.

**Food Pantries:** RAREs have been instrumental in augmenting inventory in local food pantries by forging connections among pantries and local farmers and other producers. Many farmers are now able to more easily donate leftover produce to the benefit of low-income community members.

**Community Gardens:** Community gardens bring community members together at schools, churches, or other sites to grow and distribute fresh produce. Citizens receive healthy food and education about gardening. Schools with gardens can harvest fresh food for use in their school lunch programs.

**Education:** Many communities with RAREs have begun, or are in the planning stages of beginning, education programs on gardening, canning, freezing, food budgeting, or cooking.

**Community Organizing:** As RAREs invest their time in their adopted communities, they find ways to bring community members together around shared goals. In some areas, these groups have become formalized – with regular meetings and websites.

**Table 1: RARE Outputs by Community**

Community	Year	Formal CFA	FEAST	Food Guide	Rural Grocery Survey	Other
Ontario	08-09	✓		✓		Ranchers Feeding Kids Program (Jordan Valley). Farmers market (Nyssa). Nutrition education.
	09-10	✓ (update)	✓	✓		
Pendleton	09-10	✓	✓✓✓ ✓✓	✓	✓	Farmers market (Fossil)
Astoria	09-10	✓	✓	✓		Formation of North Coast Food Web, Farmers market (Astoria)
Hood River	09-10	✓		✓	✓	Annual Food Summit (Hood River), Food Systems Leadership training (5 counties)
John Day	09-10	✓	✓	✓	✓	Farmers market, meals for homeless teens (John Day), New Emergency Food Pantry (Monument)
	10-11					
Albany	10-11	✓	✓		✓	Farmers Market SNAP incentive program (Albany), New Ten Rivers Food Web chapters (Sweet Home, Albany)
Newport	10-11	✓	✓		✓	Farmers Market SNAP incentive (Newport), School garden (Siletz)
Klamath Falls	10-11	✓	✓	✓	✓	Farmers market, community garden (Klamath Falls)

**Results/Key findings:** In addition to the outputs listed in the above table, RAREs are asked to compile a detailed list of recommendations for each community. Because rural areas face many of the same challenges, several of the recommendations are common across localities. Below is a list of recommendations shared among the 2009-2010 placements. Within the CFA reports, these general recommendations are accompanied by dozens of targeted, actionable steps that communities can take

to increase food security. In most cases, RARE members have identified and/or established community-wide working groups that are ready, along with sponsoring organizations, to act as catalysts in implementing these recommendations.

### **Shared RARE Recommendations**

- Initiate/support a coalition of regional stakeholders focused on addressing individual and community food security and the needs of the local agricultural community
- Increase processing, distribution and marketing opportunities for producers of local food
- Improve/increase access to healthy, fresh and local food supply for low income citizens and rural communities
- Encourage the development of more locally-focused farm and food businesses, and the success and growth of existing operations
- Expand awareness and education opportunities around local food and farming including promoting the benefits and value of a strong community food system

**Opportunities and Challenges:** As RARE participants complete their terms of service, they identify key players in each community food system. OFB and its community partners will continue to communicate closely with and provide support to these areas. In most cases the sponsoring organizations will take responsibility for acting on the opportunities and needs identified in the community food assessments. The RARE program provides an opportunity for local communities, sponsoring organizations, OFB, and other partners to deeply and qualitatively engage in a conversation about food systems that is happening at both local and national levels. Each recommendation in the CFA reports provides critical input to OFB, regional food banks, and other local entities and jurisdictions and they plan for future food systems and economic development work.

The most significant challenge that faces this work is reduced funding to community based programs. The cuts make it more difficult for organizations to continue the identified work. At the same time the exploration of community assets and the subsequent organizing becomes even more crucial to filling the gaps that are emerging.

### **Next Steps**

*Improved Communication:* Plans are underway to expand communication capabilities through social media and other web based communication. OFB is also exploring support for an annual gathering of community food systems organizations and advocates.

*Second year placements:* A second year of a RARE participant puts communities on surer footing to nurture relationships and guide implementation of the CFA recommendations. The capacity to fund and manage a second year RARE placement should be considered when assessing community readiness.

*Reporting and Evaluation:* Currently, RAREs submit reports twice during their period of service. OFB is developing a more comprehensive and systematic reporting system for RAREs to track their

accomplishments. Long term tracking and evaluation tools are being developed to map networking patterns in communities after RARE projects have ended.

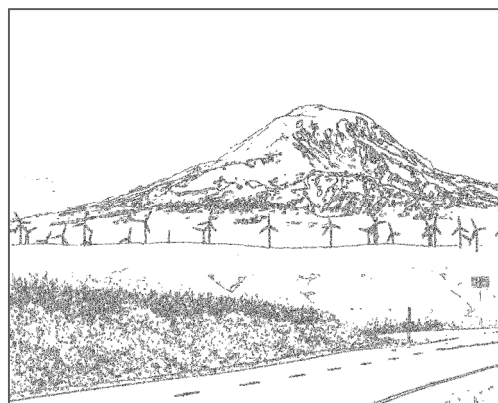
**Future Possibilities:** Oregon Food Bank has the opportunity to continue in partnership with the University of Oregon Community Service Center as long as the AmeriCorps program continues to be funded as part of the Corporation for National Service. OFB’s community food systems staff is developing more formal guidelines for determining community readiness to participate in OFB’s programs (FEAST and RARE). Staff will make proactive recommendations as well as respond to community requests and CFS partnering opportunities (Ford Foundation, Rural Development Initiative-RDI). OFB staff is actively pursuing corporation and foundation funding for future placements, particularly for consecutive year placements.

**Conclusions:** The concentrated, profoundly local interventions made through the RARE program change the way people eat, grow, sell and share food. The emphasis on community solutions, holistic scope and efficiencies gained through interdependence positively alters the food system. Oregon Food Bank has a vision of one day eliminating hunger. We recognize that simply locating and feeding every hungry person cannot achieve this goal; others generally replace members of the population who are able to step out of the cycle of poverty and hunger. Instead, we eliminate hunger through the following methods: establishment of a more vibrant exchange between farmers/producers and their markets; creation of a knowledge bank and community leadership; support for more nutritious and economical consumption across all income strata; elimination and/or leveraging of food waste; and recognition that people of all cultures and income levels need safe food that honors their culinary roots.

As mentioned, there are notable examples in the Oregon Food Bank Network where the emergency pantry is the closest source of food – *of any kind*. The loss of retail grocery is a significant factor in declining community food security. The reduction of fresh fruit and vegetables sold in small markets amplifies this insecurity. By building the foundation of the complete food system, the RARE program supports those most likely to draw on the emergency food system. It connects farmers to schools, and kids to summer lunch. It informs new priorities for local government and prompts land-use discussions. The RARE program triggers fundamental change, and as such it provides an important counter-point to emergency food distribution.

**2011/2012 RARE Communities and Sponsors**

- Grants Pass (Josephine County Food Bank)
- Eugene (Food for Lane County—focus on Florence, Mapleton, McKenzie, Oakridge)
- St. Helens (Columbia Pacific Food Bank)
- Enterprise (Northeast Oregon Development District)



## RARE PLACEMENTS 2008-2011



### **Ontario (base), Harney & Malheur**

**Southeast Oregon** was home to the first food system RARE, placed in 2008. Lightly populated overall, Harney and Malheur counties encompass the cities and towns of Burns (Harney), Ontario, Nyssa, Vale and Jordan Valley (Malheur). This is the newest Regional Food Bank and the first rural RFB to be sponsored by Oregon Food Bank.

Harney and Malheur are the two largest counties in the state, characterized by great distances and few people. Most people live far from grocery stores and food pantries. This isolation is paired with the lack of a local food system infrastructure. The rate of childhood poverty has been in excess of 20% for the last four Census reports and now exceeds 30%.

### **Why a Food Systems RARE?**

### **Pendleton (base), Gilliam, Umatilla, Wheeler, Morrow**



The Community Action Program of East Central Oregon (**CAPECO**) serves these four counties. Primarily rural, the CAPECO counties contain the cities and towns of Hermiston and Pendleton (Umatilla), Boardman (Morrow), Arlington and Condon (Gilliam), and Fossil (Wheeler).

Although vast amounts of food are grown in this region, CAPECO continues to supply over a million pounds a year of emergency food to regional residents. Many local communities are disadvantaged by dual practices: commercial farmers ship food outside of the region and local consumers procure food from equally distant sources. Wheeler County was recently identified as having the highest cost of food (\$4.07 per meal) in the nation by Feeding America's Map the Meal Gap Study.

### **Why a Food Systems RARE?**



### **Astoria (base), Clatsop, Tillamook (OR), Pacific (WA)**

This RARE placement covered the entire **North Coast** area of Oregon and Southwest Washington. The region includes the more densely populated areas around Astoria, Seaside, and Tillamook as well as rural, inland areas that are isolated from the coastal hubs.

A winter storm in 2007 caused much of Clatsop County to be closed off from all transportation and supply routes. The potential for these kinds of events highlights the importance of local food security and a solidly connected community food system. Unique to this area is the inclusion of fisheries in the food system. The area is home to highly motivated community foods movement with many beginning farmers and food artisans.

### **Why a Food Systems RARE?**

### **Hood River (base): Hood River, Wasco, Sherman (OR,) Klickitat, Skamania (WA)**

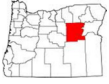


Heavily agricultural and geographically dispersed, the network of counties in the **Columbia River Gorge** includes larger cities such as Hood River and The Dalles, and smaller towns such as White Salmon (WA) and Odell.

This region produces a diverse bounty of food and producers in the Gorge area sell their products directly to consumers at twice the national rate – yet, this rate is still only 0.8%. Many residents must travel long distances to access affordable food and/or supplement their budget with emergency food. A very innovative mobile Farmers Market based in Hood River and targeting rural communities has gained recognition nationwide ([gorgegrown.com](http://gorgegrown.com)).

### **Why a Food Systems RARE?**

## RARE PLACEMENTS 2008-2011 (cont.)



### ***John Day (base): Grant County***

The site of a two-year RARE placement, **Grant County** is home to the cities of John Day, Canyon City, Long Creek, Monument, and Prarie City. Sparsley populated, Grant County is a designated frontier area with ranching as a primary industry.

Grant County has a history of independence and self-sufficiency. However, Grant County residents have difficulty accessing affordable, locally produced food. Local producers, in turn, face challenges in processing locally and accessing local consumers. There is only one supermarket and a few rural stores struggling for survival. The county was home to only one food pantry, open once a month, when the project began (there are three now).

### **Why a Food Systems RARE?**

### ***Albany (base): Linn County***



**Linn County** is home to the larger towns of Albany, Lebanon and Sweet Home as well as smaller cities such as Brownsville, Halsey, Mill City, Scio and Harrisburg. The landscape in the county varies from the fertile Willamette valley to peaks of the Cascade mountains including Mt. Jefferson.

Linn County has seen a revival of its bean and grain production in recent years as well as direct markets to serve a growing number of small producers. A FEAST in February 2010 had nearly 60 participants and resulted in significant recommendations that could be enhanced with the placement of a RARE. This energy for community foods organizing is reflected throughout the county.

### **Why a Food Systems RARE?**



### ***Newport (base): Lincoln County***

**Lincoln County** is nestled on Oregon's central coast. Home to the coastal towns of Lincoln City, Newport, Waldport and Yahats as well as smaller inland communities like Siletz and Toledo. The county contains many of the most popular visitor destinations in Oregon. It is also home to the Siletz Indian tribe.

The Lincoln County economy depends heavily on tourism and is struggling to reshape its fishing industry in a sustainable model. The seasonal nature of the economy sets the stage for low wages, food insecurity and economic insecurity for families, businesses and communities. The orchards and farms that once dotted the Coast Range have largely disappeared and much of the county beyond the Coastal area has little access to food.

### **Why a Food Systems RARE?**

### ***Klamath Falls (base): Klamath & Lake Counties***



**Klamath and Lake Counties** are rural and isolated, but home to some of Oregon's most stunning natural areas including Crater Lake National Park and the volcanic sites of "Oregon's Outback". The two population centers are Klamath Falls (Klamath) and Lakeview (Lake). Smaller communities include Paisley, Christmas Valley, Chiloquin, Bly and Malin.

The Klamath Basin has struggled with access to enough water to maintain "traditional forms" of agriculture. Lake County is isolated by geography, weather and distance. Both counties are home to people with strong "pull yourself by your bootstraps" philosophies that can make it difficult for community members who are struggling. The area is home to an emerging direct farm marketing movement, but still faces significant food access issues.

### **Why a Food Systems RARE?**